



Defining Comics?

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Defining Comics?

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent essay entitled “What Are Comics?” Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt defend what they call a “pictorial narrative” definition of comics.¹ Although their definition improves on related proposals by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, as well as the very different account David Carrier offers in his *The Aesthetics of Comics*, it remains unsatisfactory for a number of reasons.² Most noticeably, Hayman and Pratt offer an ahistorical account of comics, which leaves their account open to plausible counterexamples from the prehistory of comics. This flaw is found in all other extant attempts to define comics. One obvious response to this problem would be to incorporate a historical condition into the proposed definition. But even this may not do. Hayman and Pratt attempt to provide a traditional real definition of comics in terms of independently necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the correct application of the concept COMIC. There are reasons to think that no such account can be successful. In the bulk of this article I shall explore various problems with the Hayman and Pratt definition, and then briefly suggest some lessons for thinking about the medium of comics.³ A brief survey of past attempts to define the medium will help place the Hayman and Pratt account in context. It is to that survey that I turn next.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF RECENT ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE COMICS

In this section I discuss four recent attempts to provide a definition of comics and suggest that they all suffer from glaring difficulties. The Hayman and

Pratt proposal might, therefore, be seen as a significant advance in the definitional project. Its failures are then particularly telling.

In the first volume of his exhaustive history of the comic strip, David Kunzle proposes the following definition of that category: a comic strip consists of “a sequence of separate images” with “a preponderance of image over text” that appears (and was originally intended to appear) in “a mass medium” and tells “a story which is both moral and topical.”⁴ Kunzle’s notion of the image sequence seems on the right track—something like this core idea is central to almost all extant accounts of comics; however, the other parts of his definition are patently problematic. For example, while the vast majority of comics or comic strips are presented in a mass medium, there seems no reason to think that they must be. Why not a single-instance one-off comic?⁵ Similarly, there may be some sense in which it is right to say that comics *typically* involve a preponderance of image over text, but this does not seem a necessary condition for status as a comic. There is, of course, difficulty in determining what counts as a preponderance, but Kunzle characterizes this in terms of what “carries the burden of the narrative” and what is “primary.”⁶ What does “carrying the burden of the narrative” amount to? Kunzle is not especially precise about this; perhaps the idea is that audience comprehension of the narrative depends *primarily* on a grasp of the sequence of images rather than the text.⁷ (For example, the narrative could not be grasped without understanding the pictures, but it could be grasped—at least in part—without understanding the text.) If this is the relevant factor, then some comic book versions of classic literature (as in the *Classics Illustrated* series) appear to be counterexamples. Although these are not

typically thought of as especially successful comics from an artistic perspective, they are widely accepted as comics. Finally, Kunzle offers a particularly strong version of the narrative condition; that is, comic strips must not only tell stories, they must tell moral and topical ones. Now, Kunzle does not mean that comics are essentially morally good (a view called into question, albeit in very different ways, by certain forms of aestheticism, by some of the horror comics of the 1950s, and by Tijuana Bibles), he seems only to mean that comics have “moral content” in some broad sense. Even this is too exclusive—some comics simply function as tools for nonmoral instruction.⁸ And as I will discuss at length below, there are good reasons to think no narrative condition is plausible.

Will Eisner leaves out medium and narrative conditions and focuses exclusively on a version of Kunzle’s first condition. Comics are, in Eisner’s words, “sequential art,” by which he means to pick out a distinctive “form of art, or method of expression.”⁹ But although dropping the medium and narrative conditions might seem attractive given the problems with Kunzle’s account, Eisner’s “definition”—if it is really intended to be one—is too thin. As Scott McCloud points out in his brilliant comic book investigation of the nature of comics, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, “sequential art” does not distinguish comics from animation or, for that matter, from any other sequentially ordered examples of art.¹⁰ And it is a mistake to assume that all comics are art—think of the instructional comics mentioned earlier.¹¹ Comics are among those media—like film and photography—that can be used to make art, but can also be used nonartistically. So McCloud suggests that comics are “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”¹² We shall see that the ahistoricism of McCloud’s account leads it to count far too many things as comics. But it is also arguably too limiting—for it seems to set inappropriate constraints on what functional intentions creators of comics may have with respect to their product. We should not assume *a priori* that the author or authors of a comic intend either to convey information or to produce an aesthetic response.

Before Hayman and Pratt, the only contemporary philosopher of art to write about comics was David Carrier, whose *The Aesthetics of Comics* is still the only book-length philosophical inves-

tigation of the medium. Carrier argues for three essential features of the comic: “the speech balloon, the closely linked narrative, and the book-size scale.”¹³ Perhaps most noticeably problematic about Carrier’s account is his claim that the speech balloon is an essential feature of the comic. The simple fact is that there are a range of comics that do not use the speech balloon. Speech balloons are the most common way speech and thought are represented in the form, but captions are also used, and there are comics that eschew text altogether.¹⁴ More plausibly, speech balloons are what Kendall Walton terms a “standard” feature of comics.¹⁵ Their absence *tends* to preclude something from falling into the category of comics but does not guarantee exclusion from the category.¹⁶

Previous definitions of comics look untenable. But there does look to be some convergence on the very natural idea that comics are essentially composed of sequential images or pictures.¹⁷ This suggests that any definition should start there. And that is precisely what Hayman and Pratt do.

III. THE HAYMAN-PRATT DEFINITION OF COMICS

Hayman and Pratt propose the following definition of comics: “x is a comic iff x is a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text.”¹⁸ Let us briefly examine the components of this definition.

Hayman and Pratt characterize comics as essentially pictorial and sequential. As suggested above, both conditions initially appear to be quite reasonable. Although comics may (but need not) include words, it seems that they must include pictures. Moreover, the pictorial condition seems to distinguish comics from related forms of art such as literature, works of which must include words and may (but need not) include pictures. Hayman and Pratt also follow Kunzle, Eisner, and McCloud in claiming that comics necessarily involve a *sequence* of pictures or images. While this does seem to be a distinctive characteristic of comics that helps distinguish them from most paintings and mere illustrations, it creates a bit of a puzzle about what to say about single-panel works commonly categorized as comics, such as many instances of *The Family Circus* and *The Far Side*.¹⁹ But there are certainly responses that one could make to *The Family Circus* problem. A defender of the

sequential condition might simply deny that single panel cartoons are comics and seek to explain away the tendency to think of them that way.²⁰ Alternatively, another defense might be to point to the fact that *The Far Side* and *The Family Circus* are (at least in their original form) published sequentially—typically one panel per day.²¹

The pictorial and sequential conditions are not, by themselves, enough to distinguish comics from the art forms of film and television, so Hayman and Pratt follow McCloud in invoking a third condition—juxtaposition—that will differentiate comics from the arts of the moving image. Here is how they explain their use of the term ‘juxtaposition’: “In comics, the visual images are distinct, (paradigmatically side-by-side), and laid out in a way such that they could conceivably be seen all at once. Between each pictorial image is a perceptible space; we’ll call this the gutter.”²² They emphasize the distinctively *spatial* nature of the juxtaposition that comics exhibit—a feature that distinguishes comics from the arts of the moving image (that is, film and video), which might be said to essentially involve *temporally* juxtaposed images.

What about the successive frames on a film reel? They are (at least typically) spatially juxtaposed sequences of pictorial images.²³ It might be argued that the pictures in reels of most contemporary films do not typically comprise narratives on their own. Nor, perhaps, do they comprise narratives when combined with text—if by ‘text’ written text is meant—since it is the addition of sound that completes the narrative in such films.²⁴ However, there are sequences of frames on reels of film from the silent era that unequivocally meet the Hayman-Pratt criteria for status as comics: many such pictorial sequences do comprise narratives either alone or in conjunction with text. This seems a problematic result, since it is wildly implausible that film projectionists of the early part of last century made use of comics when they screened silent era films.²⁵ Hayman and Pratt might attempt to respond to this objection by excluding photographic pictures from the realm of comics or (more plausibly) excluding works that consist entirely of photographs.²⁶ But this would still leave reels of certain animated films as putative counterexamples to their account.²⁷

Note which features Hayman and Pratt leave out of their definition of comics: appeal to distinctive media as per Kunzle, the speech balloons to

which Carrier appeals, art status, extra-narrative functions such as McCloud builds into his definition, and ontological category. This is to their credit. The definition does not limit itself to a narrow conception of comics—it is designed to make sense of the wide range of comics and the whole gamut of conventions, purposes, and ontological categories that they exhibit.

IV. COMICS AND NARRATIVE

Hayman and Pratt claim that comics are essentially narrative. In asserting this, they are in rough agreement with Kunzle and Carrier. As mentioned above, Kunzle talks of “moral and topical” storytelling, and Carrier holds that “closely linked narrative” is an essential feature of comics.²⁸ But there really is only rough agreement here. Hayman and Pratt make no reference to the *sort* of narrative that comics must comprise, and this is clearly an improvement over those other accounts. Aside from the instructional comics mentioned above, the “moral and topical” condition looks falsified by any comic that focuses on traditional rather than topical subjects.²⁹ Carrier’s condition is also falsified by narratives to be found in comics (specifically in the art comics of the last few decades) that are not plausibly characterized as “closely linked.”³⁰ My diagnosis is that Carrier has confused a tendentious criterion for evaluating comics with a defining condition.³¹

Nonetheless, Hayman and Pratt agree with Carrier that narrative is an essential component of comics. Why do they think this? There is no argument in their essay for this condition: it is merely assumed. But why is it assumed? In the first place, almost all the uncontroversial examples of comics that we know of are narrative in form. Superhero comic books, the comic strips that appear in daily newspapers, the underground comics of the 1960s and 1970s, and the contemporary “serious” graphic novel—all these are narrative in form. But it does not follow that comics are *essentially* narrative. What else drives the intuition? Presumably, Hayman and Pratt are also motivated by a need to distinguish comics from some other sequences of juxtaposed pictures, such as arrangements of pictures in art galleries, the sequences of illustrations in cooking magazines and lab manuals, and collections of one-off cartoons ordered by publication date. There must, it seems, be something

that links and unifies the sequence of pictures in a comic. It is natural to assume that the unifying link is narration.

But it is instructive to consider some other art forms that are typically narrative. The vast majority of film that we come in contact with (for example, the products of Hollywood) is narrative, but there is plenty of nonnarrative avant-garde cinema to be found (such as films by Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, and the members of Fluxus). And while much of the literature that we come into contact with is narrative in form, there is plenty of nonnarrative literature too (for example, much haiku). This does not settle the issue with respect to narration and comics, but it does point to the fact that other arts that are *predominantly* narrative are not *essentially* narrative. I believe that something similar is true of comics.

Moreover, nonnarrative comics certainly look to be possible. For it seems easy to imagine a nonnarrative sequence of spatially juxtaposed pictures that we would classify as a comic. What is crucial is that there is some significant connection between the panels of the putative comic. But this connection need not be narrative—it could, for example, be thematic or character based.³² Or, if you are willing to grant me the distinction, the connection might be a matter of embodying some nonnarrative story form.³³ Hayman and Pratt claim that a virtue of their theory is that it allows that comics may “employ inaccessibly avant-garde strategies,” but their definition seems to preclude an artist working in the medium of comics from employing the avant-garde strategy of producing a nonnarrative work in a traditionally narrative form.³⁴

Finally, there appear to be extant examples of nonnarrative comics. For example, some of Robert Crumb’s comics seem to be nonnarrative. Consider his “Comical Comics” and “Cubist Be-Bop Comics,” both published in *R. Crumb’s Carload O’Comics*. “Comical Comics,” a sequence of only occasionally related panels, seems specifically designed to repudiate the assumption that comics are narrative. This is plausibly indicated by the author in the text of a number of panels, such as “Another breakthrough in comic book history!!” and “This doesn’t make sense!” “Cubist Be-Bop Comics” also eschews narrative, but this does not seem to be the primary point of the comic. The panels of the strip are linked thematically (they are about jazz) and formally (since the angular arrangement and shape of the panels is distinctive).³⁵

Narration does not seem like an essential condition for being a comic; however, it may well count as a standard feature of comics (as I earlier suggested was the case with the presence of speech balloons). That is, narrative might be said to be “among those features in virtue of which works in that category belong to that category”; it plausibly counts toward something’s status as a comic even if it is not a necessary condition for being a comic.³⁶ But this raises an issue about another form of typically narrative and pictorial sequential art—children’s picture books.

V. COMICS AND CHILDREN’S PICTURE BOOKS

Although not all children’s picture books are narrative, many of them are. For example, the stories of Eric Carle, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *The Grouchy Ladybug*, consist in “sequence[s] of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative . . . when combined with text.”³⁷ But most of us would not count these books as comics. So why are they not counterexamples to the Hayman-Pratt definition?

Comics are very often serialized: most comics we encounter are extended narratives that are designed to be encountered in the same publication in daily, weekly, or monthly installments. In fact, a significant number of graphic novels are originally presented in serial form (for example, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Charles Burns’s *Black Hole*, and Daniel Clowes’s *Ghost World*).³⁸ In contrast, children’s picture book production is not nearly as dominated by serialization—they are mostly “one-off” stories and there are many cases of proper sequels that are not best construed as part of a serial (for example, the *Olivia* books by Ian Falconer). But these generalizations cannot be reified into criteria for distinguishing the two categories. There are plenty of nonserial comics, both single strips drawn for a particular issue of a publication (such as the various works in the “Seduction” section of the *Comics Journal* Special Edition 2005) and full-length graphic novels—often referred to as “original graphic novels”—that were not previously serialized (such as Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*).³⁹ So the serial/nonserial distinction will not provide a basis for distinguishing comics from their near relatives in the world of children’s literature.

One initial thought might be to exclude these picture books from the category of comics by appealing to the fact that their pictures do not seem to be juxtaposed in the requisite way. After all, comics typically have multiple panels on a page. Picture books, on the other hand, often have no more than one picture per page, and it is quite common for one picture to take up two side-by-side pages. Moreover, “gutters” are not usually found in children’s books.

But this is not how Hayman and Pratt attempt to deal with the problem. And with good reason. The use of multiple panels on a page is clearly a contingent feature of comics, and one can find examples of comics that have only one picture per page. Moreover, the pictures that comprise Carle’s works can be “laid out in a way such that they could conceivably be seen all at once” just like ordinary comics.⁴⁰ So Hayman and Pratt distinguish comics from “mere illustrated texts” by appeal to a further condition: “the sequence of images does not merely contribute to the narrative—it contributes necessarily. Without the image sequence, the narrative of a true comic cannot be understood.”⁴¹ This allegedly distinguishes comics from picture books such as Dr. Seuss’s *Green Eggs and Ham*, in which the pictures are not required for narrative comprehension.

An initial worry about this condition is that it might be too strong; that is, that some comics might possess texts that comprise comprehensible narratives on their own. In fact, I think this is the case about many, if not most, of Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor* comics. As Robert Crumb writes in his introduction to the *American Splendor* anthology: “There’s so little comic-book-style action for an artist to sink his teeth into. Mostly it’s just people standing around talking, or just Harvey himself addressing the reader for page after page.”⁴² The texts of many, if not most, of these comics are understandable narratives in their own right. The image sequences are not required to identify them as narratives. Nevertheless, these seem to me to pretty clearly fall into the category of comics.⁴³

In addition, the condition seems too weak (that is, it does not suffice to exclude some paradigmatic children’s literature from the category of comics), for one can find illustrated children’s books in which the pictures function necessarily to the composition of a complete and coherent narrative. Consider Maurice Sendak’s Caldecott Medal winner, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Harper Collins,

1963). Most of the narrative of the book is supplied by the text, and the pictures just serve to illustrate the events described in them. But from the beginning of the “wild rumpus” to its end (when Max declares, “Now stop!”), there is no text whatsoever. Instead, we are confronted with a sequence of three pictures of Max and the wild things dancing, swinging from trees, and parading. This sequence of events is arguably integral to the narrative, and it cannot be grasped without the pictures. So it does not seem that the narrative can be fully understood without the pictures; hence, this classic illustrated children’s book does not seem excluded from the rank of comics by the Hayman-Pratt account.

We need to be clear here. There is no good reason to think that a children’s book (or, in fact, any work of children’s literature) cannot also be a comic—a single work can fall into both categories. In fact, recent immersion in the children’s magazine *Ladybug* has convinced me that the use of comics is rife in children’s publishing. The Spiegelman/Mouly *Little Lit* series certainly shows that comics are a natural medium in which children’s literature can be produced. My point is only that the Hayman-Pratt proposal lets too much in as it stands—an illustrated children’s story book should not count as a comic merely by virtue of the fact that the pictures are essential to grasping its narrative.⁴⁴

VI. COMICS AND HISTORY

The Hayman and Pratt definition of comics is ahistorical. In this, they are in accord with Kunzle, Eisner, McCloud, and Carrier, who also eschew any historical element in their proposed definitions. But this is a significant lacuna, for it opens all these accounts to a range of counterexamples. Simply put, spatially juxtaposed pictorial narratives existed well before the birth of comics in the nineteenth century and any definition that characterizes these as comics is guilty of artistic anachronism.

Consider, for example, the narrative sequences of pictures produced by Hogarth and other painters in the eighteenth century, the Bayeux Tapestry, and pre-Columbian picture manuscripts from eleventh-century Mexico. All these seem to meet the conditions spelled out by Hayman and Pratt, but it seems to me perverse to call these comics. Of course, one man’s perversion is

another's ordinary practice, and McCloud explicitly champions the aforementioned cases as examples of comics made prior the nineteenth century.⁴⁵

But why think these are examples of comics? "Not everything is possible at all times" wrote Heinrich Wölfflin, and Arthur C. Danto has made this a cornerstone of his philosophy of art.⁴⁶ It is an important point. Nothing could have counted as jazz in the seventeenth century, and any theory that implied that there was an instance of jazz 350 years ago or more would be anachronistic.⁴⁷ Think of how the incorporation of the Bayeux Tapestry into the category of comics would reshape our appreciation of it. "Where are the speech-balloons?" we might be led to ask. "How radical to embroider a comic!" I take it that these would be distortions. One *can* construct ahistorical categories that are temporally neutral: for example, the Hayman-Pratt definition of comics, or a definition of jazz that focuses purely on sonic properties. Morris Weitz's point that it is always possible to "close" the subconcepts of art for special purposes is instructive here.⁴⁸ But is not plausible that these are categories that ordinary folk, artists working in the medium, or art critics actually use. Although comics are an interesting artistic category, the category of spatially juxtaposed pictorial narrative does not appear to be of much art-historical or art-critical interest.⁴⁹

Of course, there may be practical and rhetorical uses ("special purposes") for appealing to such ahistorical categories. Those interested in comics suffer from a sort of aesthetic insecurity. Comics have not been taken seriously as art throughout most of the last 150 years, and those interested in the medium seem to feel need to provide an apology for their interest. It strikes me that the real function of constructing a closed and ahistorical artistic category that most comics belong to is to establish an ersatz history for comics—one that might legitimate their place in the world of art.⁵⁰ After all, if comics/spatially juxtaposed pictorial narratives have been around for centuries (as McCloud argues, and as Hayman and Pratt seem committed to), then perhaps they should be taken seriously as art! I take it that *this* is the special purpose for constructing the ahistorical category of the pictorial narrative. Perhaps that is a reason to make use of that concept, but once we are clear about this, I believe we will feel little pressure to think that comics just are spatially juxtaposed pictorial narratives.

Hayman and Pratt have offered, by their own admission, a "formal" account of comics.⁵¹ The trouble that they face is a trouble that has always faced formalism—its failure to take into account the historical contexts in which works of art are produced.

VII. A FEW MORE WORRIES

Earlier I suggested that the pictorial condition is plausible. It *is* plausible, but it is not obvious that it is true. Again, it is instructive to consider the art of film, which is also commonly thought to be an essentially pictorial form. Although the vast majority of films are pictorial in nature, there are a number of films that one might wish to resist characterizing as pictorial. Consider Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), for example, which consists of a sequence of displayed words and sentences. One *might* be tempted to call this a sequence of pictures of words and other linguistic units, but it might also be considered a sequence of nonpictorial projected images. That is, the images in that film might be said to *present* words rather than represent them. Other plausible (albeit tendentious) counterexamples to the claim that films are essentially pictorial can be found among films that utilize abstract imagery, such as works by Hans Richter and Stan Brakhage.⁵²

Can there be nonpictorial comics? If there can be nonpictorial films, then we have reason to think so. For film provides us with a plausible example of an art form that is typically pictorial but not essentially pictorial. And, again, it is not hard to imagine a nonpictorial comic (perhaps composed of a sequence of nondepictive images along with text in some format). Gary Larson's cartoon entitled "Ghost Newspapers," which depicts a bespectacled specter reading the funny pages, offers one possible vision of nonpictorial comics, as the depicted comic strips are blank except for speech balloons and captions.⁵³

Must comics be sequential? The standard worry about the sequential condition arises from the consideration of single-panel cartoons. I have already mentioned some ways a defender of the sequential condition might handle this. But there is another worry about the condition. Technically speaking, sequences are essentially ordered; sequences can be understood as functions from the natural numbers to sets. The sequence [1,2,3] is not identical

to the sequence [2,3,1]. Since it is not at all obvious that all comics must be essentially ordered, the sequence condition is questionable. Various imagined cases and the example of some webcomics suggest that the sequence condition might be jettisoned.⁵⁴

Finally, we may raise a question about the juxtaposition condition. Must comics be spatially juxtaposed? What about comics with hyperlinked frames?⁵⁵ McCloud explicitly wants to exclude these from the category of comics, but this move seems to be largely driven by his prior commitment to the spatial juxtaposition condition.⁵⁶ It is more plausible that these experiments are avant-garde explorations of the medium of comics rather than a distinct new art form.

VIII. COMICS AND DEFINITION

Hayman and Pratt follow Kunzle, Eisner, McCloud, and Carrier in attempting to provide a definition of comics.⁵⁷ I have presented numerous counterexamples to their account, but perhaps the problems I raise can be dealt with by a very different sort of definition. Even the most serious problem—the ahistorical nature of their proposal—looks like it might be dealt with by simply building a historical condition into their account. This might be done by adopting some sort of historical account of comics. For example, one might try to develop an intentional-historical definition of comics along the lines of Jerrold Levinson's intentional-historical definition of art.⁵⁸ Perhaps something is a comic just in case it is/was nonpassingly intended for regard-as-a-comic (or something close to that). Presumably the Bayeaux Tapestry and those troublesome pre-Columbian manuscripts were not so intended. There are alternatives to the intentional-historical approach that might solve the problem of ahistoricism that plagues all prior attempts to define comics. Perhaps a procedural account, such as a version of George Dickie's institutional account might do the trick. Could it be that an object is a comic if and only if it is an artifact created to be presented to a particular artworld public (namely, the comics public)?⁵⁹ I doubt either account will do, but rather than investigating the possibility of such accounts I want to raise a few questions about the very pursuit of definition. Why continue the attempt to define comics? Why not simply give up the task of

trying to provide a traditional definition of comic, which recent work on the nature of concepts suggests may be unachievable?⁶⁰ What do we need a definition of comics for in the first place?

We *might* be interested in having a method of identifying comics. There are challenging cases, and we may have an interest in categorizing correctly. A definition would help, but if identification is the main goal, we need not require it. A historical narrative approach modeled on Carroll's historical narrative account of art identification might do the trick for us.⁶¹ Or perhaps we identify by using criteria, as Berys Gaut has argued is the case with respect to the category of art.⁶² I suspect we can, do, and should use a range of methods for identifying both art in general and the comic in particular. Definition does not appear necessary.

We might also be interested in an account of how to evaluate and interpret comics. Uncovering the definition of comics might seem crucial to these projects. Carrier is explicit about this assumption in the evaluative case: "A nonreductive evaluation of the comic strip requires identifying its essence, and so understanding in a positive way how it differs from other visual and verbal art forms."⁶³ He is no less explicit about the interpretive case: "to interpret an art, we need to know its essence, its defining qualities."⁶⁴ Nonetheless, it is hard to see why (in general or in this specific case) definition is required for either evaluation or interpretation. Perhaps if comic were a functional concept—or had a functional essence—the evaluation of a comic *as a comic* would require some grasp of that essence. But no reason has been given to think that such is the case; in fact, the previous arguments suggest that it is not. Moreover, the fact that warranted evaluation and interpretation of an artwork require knowledge of the sort of thing it is does not imply that knowledge of essence is also required. But without a serious argument for Carrier's claims, the possibility of warranted evaluation and interpretation without grasp of a definition remains a live one. It is clear that neither the evaluation nor the interpretation of other artistic media such as music and painting have ever waited on definition.

Suppose for the sake of argument that the art forms of music and painting *can* be defined. If so, it is eminently plausible that no one was in a proper epistemic position to do so before the twentieth century, for it is only with the production of modernist and avant-garde works that we

have come to see what is essential and inessential to those art forms. But surely there were critics who were in a position to evaluate and interpret paintings as paintings and music as music before the twentieth century. Carrier's position seems to imply that this could not have been the case. And if music and painting do not have defining features, then the truth of Carrier's position would have the even more implausible consequence that we could not ever properly evaluate or interpret works that belong to those art forms. I suggest that the situation with respect to comics is analogous to that of painting and music. Definition looks unnecessary to proper evaluation and interpretation.

Furthermore, it is noticeable that the arguments offered above suggest that if a definition of comics were possible, it would most likely take procedural or historical form. These forms of definition typically offer little help in evaluating or interpreting comics. So it seems improbable that a definition of comics—even if it were forthcoming—would be of much help in giving us critical and interpretive guidance.

What then is required for the evaluation and interpretation of comics as comics? To focus on evaluation, I would suggest that what we need is some grasp of the various styles, techniques, and purposes found in the art form, as well as a broad grasp of how to evaluate the variety of elements that are typically (but not necessarily) used in it, such as narrative, drawing, dialogue, and coloring. The virtues of Humean true judges may be of assistance.⁶⁵ But I see no reason to think knowledge of a definition of comics (or even some of its essential features) is requisite, and I suspect that the story about what we need to interpret comics will not be much different.

Finally, we might be interested in determining the standard, contra-standard, and variable features of the art of comics, for it might be crucial to our critical purposes that we know what to expect—and what not to expect—from the art of comics.⁶⁶ A real definition of comics might give us some standard features. Perhaps it would indicate what features were variable and contra-standard too. But standard features need not be necessary features of works of art, so a definition does not seem required. In point of fact, necessary features are not the most critically relevant of standard features—we are typically most interested in features whose absence tends to preclude a work from

falling into a category, not ones that are *required* for category membership. What we need is close examination of the medium, not necessary and sufficient conditions.

IX. CONCLUSION

Extant definitions of comics are unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Their biggest flaw is their failure to attend to the historical specificity of the medium of comics. Although historical or procedural approaches might fix this problem, there is a very real possibility that the definitional project is misguided. Moreover, there is no pressing need to come up with a definition. The art of comics, which began in the middle of the nineteenth century and developed largely out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricature and mid-nineteenth-century British humor magazines such as *Punch*, can and should be understood on its own terms and by reference to its own history.⁶⁷ Establishing the existence of artistic pictorial narrative prior to the nineteenth century might seem to offer a way to establish the art status of comics, but comics have earned the right to be considered art on their own merits. Works such as George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* strips, Spiegelman's *Maus*, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (New York, Pantheon: 2000), and the Crumb oeuvre provide incontrovertible evidence of the artistic possibility of the form. Anachronistic rhetoric is unnecessary. We should get on with the business of thinking seriously about comics as art. Let's get beyond the definitional project.⁶⁸

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1. Greg Hayman and Henry John Pratt, "What Are Comics?" in *A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, ed. David Goldblatt and Lee Brown (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc., 2005), pp. 419–424.

2. Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art* (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1985); Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993); David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics* (Penn State University Press, 2000).

3. Like Hayman and Pratt and others who have written on the topic, I will assume that the extension of the concept comic is fairly diverse. It includes comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, one-off comics, serials, and webcomics.

4. David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* (University of California Press, 1973), p. 2.

5. Compare Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 420.

6. Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, pp. 2–3.

7. Kunzle does take the condition to exclude "any strip in which the captions occupy a larger space than the picture," but this is misleading. Relative size is surely irrelevant to status as a comic. See Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, p. 2.

8. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, pp. 142–145.

9. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 5.

10. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 7–8.

11. If "art" is read broadly, to mean something like "craft," then the category of "sequential art" will be far too wide.

12. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 9.

13. Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 74.

14. See Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" pp. 420–422. Hayman and Pratt provide two nice examples of comics without speech balloons on p. 422.

15. Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 338–340.

16. This might be tendentious. Perhaps speech balloons are merely what Walton terms "variable" features of the category of comics. Maybe, but it does not seem that the presence or absence of speech balloons is irrelevant to whether something belongs to the category of comics.

17. See also Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993). Sabin claims that the "fundamental ingredient of a comic is the 'comic strip' ... a narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures" (p. 5).

18. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 423.

19. Of course, there are sequential paintings (such as certain triptychs). How do Hayman and Pratt propose to distinguish comics from narrative sequences of paintings? It is unclear. Perhaps they would follow McCloud's suggestion that some such sequences of paintings (for example, Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*) are in fact comics (*Understanding Comics*, p. 17).

20. McCloud makes such a suggestion: "such single panels might be classified as 'comic art' in the sense that they derive part of their visual vocabulary from comics" (*Understanding Comics*, p. 20).

21. Howard Curzer suggested this approach to "The Family Circus problem" in conversation with me.

22. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 423.

23. Why "typically"? Because it is not clear that film is essentially pictorial. For arguments to the effect that it is not, see Noël Carroll, "Defining the Moving Image," in his *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 49–74.

24. However, movie storyboards might fit the Hayman-Pratt conditions. A student in a class at Trinity University (TX) first pointed this out to me. Intriguingly, Eisner includes a brief discussion of story boards in *Comics and Sequential Art*. He does not, however, claim they are comics

and, in fact, seems to suggest that they are not: "While they employ the major elements of sequential art, they depart from comic books and strips in that they dispense with balloons and panels" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 74).

25. McCloud seems to accept this counterintuitive conclusion: "[Y]ou might say that before it's projected, film is just a very very very very slow comic!" (*Understanding Comics*, p. 8).

26. But there are photo-comics to consider (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p. 20).

27. In a reply to an earlier version of this article, Pratt suggested an alternative approach to handling the problem. The pictorial sequences that make up the standard comic are the intended objects of artistic evaluation and appreciation—this is not so in the case of the image sequences on film reels. One might then add a further condition to the Hayman-Pratt definition that would reflect this. Pratt suggests this might be done by adding a condition that made reference to "proper or appropriate ways of viewing" (Henry Pratt, "Comments on Aaron Meskin," American Society for Aesthetics, Annual Meeting, Providence, RI, October 2005). This seems like a plausible amendment, but I wonder if it will do the trick. Suppose a conceptual filmmaker produces a silent narrative film reel as intended to be the primary object of artistic interest. Would that make it a comic? I am not convinced it would. If not, the further condition would not be enough to exclude certain filmstrips from counting as comics.

28. Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, p. 2; Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 74. Carrier also claims that "what defines the image sequence in the true comic is that successive scenes are close together and in an easily read order" (*The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 55).

29. It appears Kunzle included "topicality" in the list of conditions as a means of excluding certain works of traditional Christian art. See Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip*, p. 3.

30. See, for example, Richard McGuire's "Here," in *Raw: Open Wounds from the Cutting Edge of Comix*, ed. Art Spiegelman and François Mouly (New York: Penguin: 1989), vol. 2(1), pp. 69–74. McGuire's comic consists of a sequence of panels set in the same location but in a nonlinear temporal order. It is not obvious what "closely linked" amounts to, but while there is arguably narrative in this comic, it might well count as a counterexample to the requirement that such narratives be closely linked.

31. It is noticeable that Carrier writes of the sort of narrative that "true" comics exhibit (*The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 55).

32. I assume here that narrative requires some minimal causal (or, perhaps, explanatory) connection between represented events. Of course, there are weaker versions of narrative to be found, but I am suspicious of accounts of narrative that appeal to neither causal nor other explanatory relations. See George Wilson, "Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford University Press, 2003).

33. See Noël Carroll, "On the Narrative Connection," in *New Perspectives on Narrative*, ed. Will van Peer and Seymour Chatman (SUNY Press, 2000).

34. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 423.

35. Robert Crumb, *R. Crumb's Carload O'Comics: An Anthology of Choice Strips and Stories-1968 to 1976* (New York: Belier Press and Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink

Press, 1996). Other examples of plausibly nonnarrative comics can be found in *Rosetta: A Comics Anthology*, ed. Ng Suat Tong (Gainesville: Alternative Comics, 2002), vol. 1. Renee French's contribution, "Self, Food and Mail, Housing," consists of three pages of drawings, which serve as a sort of comics portrait of a man who is not otherwise depicted. "Constructions" by Stefan J. H. van Dinther is a comic that consists of an arguably nonnarrative sequence of pictures about mathematical constructions. It would be open to Hayman and Pratt to deny these are comics (or argue that despite appearance they are narrative), but it is more plausible to treat them as explorations of the boundaries of comics.

36. Walton, "Categories of Art," p. 339.

37. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 423. Eric Carle, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (New York: Philomel, 1994) and Eric Carle, *The Grouchy Ladybug* (HarperFestival, 1999).

38. Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), originally published in different form in *RAW* magazine (1980-1991) and *Short Order Comix #1* (1973); Charles Burns, *Black Hole* (New York: Pantheon: 2005), originally published as *Black Hole #1-#12* by Kitchen Sink Press and Fantagraphics Books (1995-2004); Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 1998), originally published in *Eightball* #11-#18 (1993-1997).

39. Will Eisner, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (New York: DC Comics, 2000); Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006).

40. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 423.

41. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 424.

42. Robert Crumb, "Introduction," in Harvey Pekar, *American Splendor* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1986), n.p.

43. Perhaps they are experimental or avant-garde comics. Crumb himself says that "what Pekar does is certainly new to the comicbook medium" ("Introduction"). But they are comics nonetheless.

44. A particularly intriguing example to consider is Mo Willems's Caldecott Honor Book *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2003). Although the narrative of the book is quite simple, it is not clear that one can understand it without seeing the pictures. Moreover, Willems's book utilizes speech balloons (a standard feature of comics), and it meets all the other conditions to which Hayman and Pratt refer. But I would not consider the book a comic. I suggest that Willems is working in a different tradition than comics artists. It is only reference to some historical feature like a tradition that the book can be excluded from the realm of comics. I expand on the need for taking history into account in the following section.

45. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 10-19.

46. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover Publications, n.d.). See, for example, Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 44-47.

47. Imagine discovering some record of ancient pre-Columbian music that sounded like the late Coltrane. It might be tempting to call this music jazzlike, but it would be a simple mistake to call it jazz. Something similar is true with respect to pop art, minimalism, cyber-punk, alt-country, and comics.

48. Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956): 27-35.

49. Danto writes, in a somewhat different context, of "examples in which two outwardly similar things may nevertheless differ in so radical a way that the outward similarity proves altogether fortuitous." See his *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 162. My suggestion is that the outward similarities between the contemporary medium of the comic and past examples of the sequential narrative image mask important differences.

50. Compare Roger Sabin, *Adult Comics: An Introduction*, p. 13.

51. Hayman and Pratt, "What Are Comics?" p. 422.

52. See Noël Carroll, "Defining the Moving Image," in his *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 49-74, quote from p. 65.

53. Gary Larson, *Unnatural Selections* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1991), p. 12.

54. See, for example, various webcomics by John Barber.

55. See, for example, some of the hypercomics by Daniel Merlin Goodbrey at <http://e-merl.com/hypercomics>.

56. McCloud writes: "But for all of hypertext's advantages, the basic ideas behind hypertext and comics are diametrically opposed! ... To break a comic down into single pictures is to tear that map to shreds—and with it, the very fabric of comics' core identity." See his *Reinventing Comics* (New York: Perennial, 2000), p. 215.

57. To be fair, Carrier only ever offers necessary conditions—he does not claim that meeting these conditions is sufficient to make something a comic.

58. Jerrold Levinson, "Defining Art Historically," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 232-250.

59. See George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (Evanston, IL: Chicago Spectrum Press, 1997).

60. For a discussion of the relevance of contemporary theory of concepts to the issue of defining art, see Jeffrey T. Dean, "The Nature of Concepts and the Definition of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61 (2003): 29-35.

61. Noël Carroll, "Identifying Art," in *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy*, ed. Robert J. Yanal (Penn State University Press, 1994), pp. 3-38.

62. Berys Gaut, "'Art' as a Cluster Concept," in *Theories of Art*, ed. Noël Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), pp. 25-44, and "The Cluster Account of Art Defended," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 45 (2005): 273-288.

63. Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 95.

64. Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, p. 7.

65. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays: Moral Political Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 1985).

66. Walton, "Categories of Art" pp. 338-340.

67. Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comics, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996). Since the comic is a hybrid art form, this may involve understanding it in relation to the history of the art forms from which it developed. See Jerrold Levinson, "Hybrid Art Forms," in *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essay in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 26-36.

68. Earlier versions of this article were presented at Texas Tech University, Trinity University (TX), and the 2005

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